

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Interview With Michele Norris and Steve Inskeep of National Public Radio
June 1, 2009

U.S. Foreign Relations/Middle East Peace Process

Mr. Inskeep. Mr. President, welcome to the program.

The President. Thank you so much.

Ms. Norris. We're so glad you could join us, or we could join you, in this case. If you want to improve relations with the Muslim world, do you have to change or alter in some way the strong U.S. support for Israel?

The President. No, I don't think that we have to change strong U.S. support for Israel. I think that we do have to retain a constant belief in the possibilities of negotiations that will lead to peace, and that that's going to require, from my view, a two-state solution; that's going to require that each side, Israelis and Palestinians, meet their obligations.

I've said very clearly to the Israelis both privately and publicly that a freeze on settlements including natural growth is part of those obligations. I've said to the Palestinians that their continued progress on security and ending the incitement that, I think, understandably, makes Israelis so concerned—that has to be—those obligations have to be met.

So the key is to just believe that that process can move forward and that all sides are going to have to give. And it's not going to be an easy path, but one that I think we can achieve.

Israel

Mr. Inskeep. Mr. President, you mentioned a freeze on settlements. The Israel Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is quoted today saying to Cabinet members in Israel that he will not follow your demand for a freeze on settlements in the West Bank, that it's not going to happen. What does it suggest that Israel is not taking your advice?

The President. Well, I think it's still early in the process. They formed a government, what, a month ago? I think that we're going to have a series of conversations. Obviously, the first priority of a Israeli Prime Minister is to think in terms of Israel's security. I believe that strategically the status quo is unsustainable when it comes to Israeli security, that over time, in the absence of peace with the Palestinians, Israel will continue to be threatened militarily and will have enormous problems along its borders. And so it is not only in the Palestinians' interest to have a state, I believe that it is in the Israelis' as well, and in the United States interest as well.

Middle East Peace Process

Mr. Inskeep. But if the United States says for years that Israel should stop the settlements, and for years Israel simply does not, and the United States continues supporting Israel in roughly the same way, what does that do with American credibility in the Muslim world, which you're trying to address?

The President. Well, I think what is certainly true is that the United States has to follow through on what it says. Now, as I said before, I haven't said anything yet because it's early in the process. But it is important for us to be clear about what we believe will lead to peace and

that there's not equivocation and there's not a sense that we expect only compromise on one side. It's going to have to be two-sided.

And I don't think anybody would deny that in theory. When it comes to the concrete, then the politics of it get difficult both within the Israeli and the Palestinian communities. But, look, if this was easy, it would have already been done.

Israel-U.S. Relations

Ms. Norris. Many people in the region are concerned. When they look at the U.S. relationship with Israel, they feel that Israel has favored status in all cases. And what do you say to people in the Muslim world who feel that the U.S. has repeatedly over time, blindly supported Israel?

The President. Well, what I'd say is there's no doubt that the United States has a special relationship with Israel. There are a lot of Israelis who used to be Americans. There is huge cross-cultural ties between the two countries. I think that as a vibrant democracy that shares many of our values, obviously, we're deeply sympathetic to Israel.

And I think I would also say that given past statements surrounding Israel, the notion that they should be driven into the sea, that they should be annihilated, that they should be obliterated, the armed aggression that's been directed towards them in the past, you can understand why not only Israelis would feel concern, but the United States would feel it was important to back this stalwart ally.

Now, having said all that, what is also true is that part of being a good friend is being honest, and I think there have been times where we are not as honest as we should be about the fact that the current direction, the current trajectory in the region is profoundly negative not only for Israeli interests, but also U.S. interests. And that's part of a new dialog that I'd like to see encouraged in the region.

U.S. Foreign Policy

Mr. Inskeep. Does it undermine your effort, reaching out to the Muslim world, which you'll do with the speech in Cairo, that you'll be speaking in a country with an undemocratic government that is an ally of the United States?

The President. Well, keep in mind, I already spoke in Turkey. They have a democracy that I'm sure some Turks would say has flaws to it, just as there are some Americans who would suggest there are flaws to American democracy.

Mr. Inskeep. Are you about to say Egypt is just a country with some flaws?

The President. No, no, what I'm about—never—don't put words in my mouth, Steve, especially not in the White House. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Inskeep. Just wondered where you're headed with that. [*Laughter*]

The President. You can wait until the postscript.

There is a wide range of governments throughout the Muslim world and the non-Muslim world, and the main thing for me to do is to project what our values are, what our ideals are, what we care most deeply about. And that is democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of religion.

Now, in every country I deal with, whether it's China, Russia, ultimately Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, allies as well as non-allies, there are going to be some differences. And what I

want to do is just maintain consistency in affirming what those values that I believe in are, understanding that we're not going to get countries to embrace various of our values simply by lecturing or through military means. We can't force these approaches. What we can do is stand up for human rights; we can stand up for democracy. But I think it's a mistake for us to somehow suggest that we're not going to deal with countries around the world in the absence of their meeting all our criteria for democracy.

Mr. Inskip. Michele Norris.

Hizballah and Hamas

Ms. Norris. You've mentioned many times the importance of reaching out to Iran with an open hand, trying to engage that country. Are you also willing to try to engage with Hizballah or Hamas, entities that have now had significant gains in recent elections?

The President. Well, let's just underscore a point here. Iran is a huge, significant nation-state that has, I think, across the international community been recognized as such. Hizballah and Hamas are not. And I don't think that we have to approach those entities in the same way. In the——

Ms. Norris. If I may ask though, does that change with their electoral gains?

The President. Well, look, if at some point Lebanon is a member of the United Nations, if at some point they are elected as a head of state, or a head of state is elected in Lebanon that is a member of that organization, then that would raise these issues. That hasn't happened yet.

With respect to Hamas, I do think that if they recognize the Quartet principles that have been laid out—and these are fairly modest conditions here—that you recognize the State of Israel without prejudging what various grievances or claims are appropriate, that you abide by previous agreements, that you renounce violence as a means of achieving your goals, then I think the discussions with Hamas could potentially proceed.

And so the problem has been that there's been a preference oftentimes on the part of these organizations to use violence and not take responsibility for governance as a means of winning propaganda wars or advancing their organizational aims. At some point, though, they may make a transition. There are examples of, in the past, of organizations that have successfully transitioned from violent organizations to ones that recognize that they can achieve their aims more effectively through political means, and I hope that occurs.

Iran/Nuclear Nonproliferation

Mr. Inskip. Mr. President, because you mentioned Iran, I want to ask a question about that and about your efforts to engage with the Muslim world in a different way. I'd like to know which development you think would be more harmful to America's prestige in the Muslim world, which is worse: an Iranian Government that has nuclear weapons, or an Israeli military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities?

The President. Well, I'm not going to engage in these hypotheticals, Steve, but I can tell you that my view is that Iran possessing a nuclear weapon would be profoundly destabilizing to the region, not just with respect to Israel's response, but the response of other Arab States in the region or Muslim states in the region that might be concerned about Iran having an undue advantage.

More broadly, I've got a concern about nuclear proliferation generally, something that I talked about in my speech in Prague. I think one of the things that we need to do is to describe

to the Iranians a pathway for them achieving security, respect, and prosperity that doesn't involve them possessing a nuclear weapon. But we have to be able to make that same argument to other countries that might aspire to nuclear weapons, and we have to apply some of those same principles to ourselves, so that—for example, I'll be traveling next month to Moscow to initiate START talks, trying to reduce our nuclear stockpiles, as part of a broader effort in the international community to contain our nuclear weapons.

Mr. Inskip. And would you urge other nations to restrain themselves until you can complete that process?

The President. Well, that's going to be the challenge. That's why we're so busy around here all the time.

Afghanistan

Mr. Inskip. Let me ask about one other challenge, if I might. Forgive me, Michele, go ahead.

Ms. Norris. No, go ahead.

Mr. Inskip. Is your effort to engage the Muslim world likely to be complicated or even undermined by the fact that you're escalating a war in a Muslim country, Afghanistan, with the inevitable civilian casualties and other bad news that will come out of that?

The President. Well, there's no doubt that anytime you have civilian casualties that always complicates things, whether it was a Muslim or a non-Muslim country. I think part of what I'll be addressing in my speech is a reminder that the reason we're in Afghanistan is very simple, and that is 3,000 Americans were killed, and you had a devastating attack on the American homeland. The organization that planned those attacks intends to carry out further attacks, and we cannot stand by and allow that to happen.

But I am somebody who is very anxious to have the Afghan Government and the Pakistani Government have the capacity to ensure that those safe havens don't exist. And so it's—I think will be an important reminder that we have no territorial ambitions in Afghanistan. We don't have an interest in exploiting the resources of Afghanistan. What we want is simply that people aren't hanging out in Afghanistan who are plotting to bomb the United States. And I think that's a fairly modest goal that other Muslim countries should be able to understand.

Former Vice President Dick Cheney/U.S. Foreign Policy/National Security

Ms. Norris. Mr. President, you have talked about creating a new path forward on Guantanamo, on the relationship that the U.S. has with countries in the Muslim world, and on several fronts. But at the same time, the former Vice President has been out talking about the policies in the former administration. He's forceful; he's unapologetic; and he doesn't seem willing to scale back his rhetoric. How much does that undermine or complicate your effort to extend a hand, to explain the Obama doctrine, and draw a line of demarcation between that administration and yours?

The President. Well, he also happens to be wrong, right? And last time, immediately after his speech, I think there was a fact check on his speech that didn't get a very good grade.

Does it make it more complicated? No, because I think these are complicated issues and there is a legitimate debate to be had about national security. And I don't doubt the sincerity of the former Vice President or the previous administration in wanting to protect the American people. And these are very difficult decisions. If you've got a—as I said in my speech, if you've

got a organization that is out to kill Americans and is not bound by any rules, then that puts an enormous strain on not only our intelligence operations, our national security operations, but also our legal system.

The one thing that I'm absolutely persuaded by, though, is that if we are true to our ideals and our values, if these decisions aren't made unilaterally by the executive branch, but rather in consultation and in open fashion and in democratic debate, that the Muslim world and the world generally will see that we have upheld our values, been true to our ideals, and that ultimately will make us safer.

Ms. Norris. It's unusual for the debate to be playing out in a public forum, though. Have you picked up the phone? Have you talked to him? Have you had a conversation?

The President. Oh, I don't think it's that unusual. As I remember, there were some speeches given by Vice President Gore that differed with President Bush's policies. And I think that's healthy; that's part of the debate. And I don't in any way begrudge, I think, anybody in debating, sometimes ferociously, these issues that are of premium importance to the United States. And I am constantly listening and gauging whether or not there's new information out there that I should take into account.

I will tell you that based on my reviews, I am very confident about the policies that we've taken being the right ones for the American people.

Mr. Inskeep. We're told that our time is up. So you've been very generous.

The President. Thank you, guys.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 4:02 p.m. in the Library at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on June 2.

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